

Recovering from Addictions

Addictions have always been a part of the human predicament. Addictions of one kind or another have always enslaved people. They have always led to spiritual, emotional, social and, sometimes, physical death.

Addiction can be defined as the habitual use of a substance or the habitual practice of a behavior to control one's mood in spite of the fact that the substance or the behavior creates repeated problems. Chemicals, food, people, sex, work, spending, gambling and religious practices are a few of the things that can become addictive. We can become addicted to any substance or behavior which alters our mood, or which anesthetizes us to our emotional pain. It is not just the alcoholics on skid row that have a problem with addiction! Keith Miller describes the extent of the problem in this way:

Sometime people—especially religious people—do not realize that when they use things like food, work, cigarettes, or tranquilizers to “quiet their nerves” they are keeping themselves from facing the anxieties and denial in their lives as much as if they were drowning them in alcohol. . . . The excessive use of tranquilizers and sleeping pills, excessive smoking, drinking, working, religious work, and addictions to excitement, to sex, and to people (including our children)—all these things are crippling “normal people” daily. The startling fact is that, because of denial, we only see the destructive nature of these things clearly in the lives of other people. We minimize our own compulsive and addictive behaviors and honestly believe that we don't have a problem.¹

Gerald May provides a helpful list of the characteristics of addiction. He says that when we are addicted, the first sign is tolerance. We require increased quantities of a substance or increased frequency of a behavior to provide the same mood alteration. A second characteristic is withdrawal. We find it very uncomfortable if we are not able to continue our addiction. Self-deception, the third characteristic of addiction, comes as we minimize or deny the problems which our addictions create. The fourth characteristic is loss of willpower. We find ourselves unable to freely choose to stop. Finally, there is a distortion of attention, as we become idolatrously attached to the addictive substance or behavior.²

Recovery from addictions is a spiritual journey. The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous recognize the spiritual nature of recovery, and they have, consequently, been a vital resource to hundreds of thousands of people seeking recovery from addictions.³ We want to encourage you, if you have not already done so, to join a fellowship of people who are using the Twelve Steps as a guide for their recovery from addiction.

The six studies in this Life Recovery Guide are based on the structure of the first three steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The Twelve Steps are based on biblical principles and reflect the wisdom gained from many years of experience in recovery. We are convinced that the Bible is a rich storehouse of hope and healing for people struggling with addictions. Our prayer is that these studies will help to guide, sustain and enrich your recovery.

May your roots sink deeply in the soil of God's love.

Dale and Juanita Ryan

¹Keith Miller, *Sin: The Ultimate Deadly Addiction* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 77-78.

²Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 26-31.

³See Leader's Notes for a complete list of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

1

Admitting Our Powerlessness

"I can handle it. I learned a long time ago that no one else is going to take care of me. I need to be strong enough to take care of myself, otherwise I will not survive."

The journey from reliance on our own power to an admission of powerlessness is often a very long and very difficult one. We do not easily abandon the myths of power and control. Our very survival seems to depend on these myths. Letting go of them seems to be full of risk and danger.

Facing the reality of our powerlessness is, however, the first step in recovery from addictions. It is a step which takes courage. And, it is a necessary step. As long as we stay in denial, believing that we are able to take care of our own needs and to solve our problems by our own efforts, we will shut God out of our lives. There is no way to receive help and healing until our myths of power are surrendered.

Sometimes the chaos created by our addictions forces us to see clearly our need for help. Sometimes the people who care about us will lovingly tell us the truth about who we have become, giving us an opportunity to break out of our denial. However it happens, re-

covery begins when our myth of power comes to an end.

Somehow God's power breaks through our denial and illuminates our powerlessness. What has become obvious to everyone else, becomes obvious to us. We can't manage by ourselves. We can no longer control our lives. We are powerless over our addictions. We need help. This terrible, painful recognition is where recovery begins.

☐ Personal Reflection

1. What makes it difficult for you to face the reality that you are not powerful enough to handle your problems alone?

2. What events in your life have helped you to face the reality of your powerlessness over your addiction?

3. What does "powerlessness" mean to you?

☐ Bible Study

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:9-13)

1. What insights did you gain during your time of personal reflection?

2. The Pharisees were religious leaders who avoided contact with "sinners" in an attempt to please God. It is reasonable to assume that the Pharisees would identify people with addictions as sinners to be avoided and rejected. What effect does religiously justified rejection have on people struggling with addiction?

3. What do you think Matthew the tax collector needed—instead of

rejection—from the religious community?

4. Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick."
What is the point Jesus is making with this metaphor?

5. Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."
What are the dangers of being "righteous"?

6. What motivates us to hang on to our false sense of righteousness
and to our sense of power over our own lives?

7. Jesus also said, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy,

not sacrifice.' " What does this mean?

8. How could learning to be merciful to yourself and others help you
to face your powerlessness over your addiction?

☐ Personal Reflection

What would you like to say to the God who understands that you
are powerless over your addiction?



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See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. (Deuteronomy 30:11-20)

1. What insights did you gain during your time of personal reflection?

2. The text presents two options. We can choose life and prosperity, or we can choose death and destruction. How are addictions a way of choosing death and destruction?

3. How can recovery from addictions lead to life?

4. This text says that choosing life is not too difficult or beyond our reach. What is it about addictions that can make choosing life seem beyond our reach?

5. What gives you hope that recovery is not beyond your reach?

6. The text suggests that choosing life is possible because "The word [of God] is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." Turning our wills over to the care of God is not a violation of who we are. It is a fulfillment of our deepest desires.

How has this been true in your own recovery?

7. God is not a disinterested observer of our choices. He wants us to choose life. He says, "Now choose life." How might this help you decide to turn your will over to the care of God?

8. Making the decision to choose life is not a one-time event, but a one-day-at-a-time event. Reflect for a moment on what the choice of death would look like for you today.

Now reflect on what the choice of life would look like for you today. Listen to God say to you, "Choose life." Picture yourself listening to his voice, staying close to him and turning over your will to his care.

What were your thoughts and feelings during this reflection?

☐ Prayer

What would you like to say to the God who can be trusted to care for your will?

